DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 084 CG 032 712

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TITLE	Managing Global Careers: Changes and Challenges for the 21st Century.
PUB DATE	2003-01-00
NOTE	8p.; Paper presented at the Annual NATCON Convention (29th, Jan. 20-23, 2003; Ottawa, Ontario). NATCON stands for National Consultation on Career Development.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.contactpoint.ca/natcon-conat/2003/pdf/pdf-03-11.pdf.
PUB TYPE	Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Employment Opportunities; Foreign Countries; *Foreign Workers; *Global Approach
IDENTIFIERS	Canada

ABSTRACT

Working internationally in an increasingly global economy, particularly as a manager, is different than it was just a few years ago. Many countries are now equipped to fill management positions internally. "Expat" packages are few and far between. What does it really mean to work in a global marketplace? How easy is it to work abroad these days? What challenges do international workers face when returning home? This paper provides a summary of themes drawn from interviews, learning journal entries, reflections, and case examples collected in an international management cooperative program over the past 2 years. The stories reported here are those of graduate students preparing to work abroad, international managers working throughout the Pacific Rim region, and program alumni who have recently repatriated. Clear themes emerge from these stories about the career challenges and success factors impacting global careers in today's economy. (Author)

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ED 481 084

Managing Global Careers: Changes and Challenges for the 21st Century

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For many years, career practitioners and employment counsellors have encouraged their clients to look beyond national borders and embark on global careers. Programs at many Canadian colleges and universities are designed to prepare students for working in the international arena. Comprehensive books provide tips and strategies for successfully living abroad (Kruempelmann, 2002). However, in a rapidly changing world, how can we be confident that the information about global careers that we share with our clients is accurate?

The Changing Global Workplace

In recent years the global workplace has made a dramatic transformation. Many countries that once offered big opportunities to expatriate (ex-pat) managers from the West have now had sufficient time to educate their own citizens to take on leadership roles. A trend to "local hires" has made extravagant ex-pat packages almost unheard of today. Countries that had never before struggled with the challenges of unemployment are now caught up in a complicated global economy with multinational corporations and international partnerships. Layoffs are occurring all over the world.

In a global economy dependent on international trade and travel, recent events like the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US in 2001, the subsequent War on Terror, the Bali Bombing in 2002, and the War in Iraq in 2003 have impacted even village economies throughout the world. Multinational corporations hire villagers in Malaysia, for example, to tap rubber trees or assemble high tech computer components. When world demand for products changes, when international travel and logistics become less secure or less convenient, and when companies become concerned about doing business in a particular international location, individual careers are greatly impacted. More than ever before, we are all interconnected in a global community.

Some of the changes are subtle. Multinational corporations, cross-border trade agreements such as the European Economic Union (EEU) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and international standards such as the ISO initiatives, all combine to create a seamless marketplace. Robert Reich, the former US Labor Secretary, has been widely quoted as saying that it's hard to tell "who are they and who are us."

I recently toured a high tech manufacturing facility in Malaysia, owned by a Canadian company based in Toronto. Without people there that day, it would have been almost impossible to determine where in the world the building was located—it was a typical high tech operation in a typical high tech industrial park. Boardroom doors had names like "Cedar" and "Fir" on them. Sophisticated security procedures were similar to those in any other high tech facility. The only difference was that, in Malaysia, the company sent a shuttle bus out to neighbouring villages to bring in Malay people…all in traditional dress under their lab coats. The cafeteria provided "street market" type stalls for the women to shop at. There, during their lunch breaks, they could buy clothes for themselves and their children, jewellery, make-up and household items. There was only one foreigner (non-Malaysian) working in this Canadian-owned operation—a manager from Singapore. Local colleges and universities are equipped to train all of the workers required, from those in entry-level positions to senior management. Several of the Malaysians, of course, had also taken the opportunity to study abroad. The important point to note is that this Canadian company was functioning very effectively without any onsite ex-pat Canadian managers. Quite a change from just a few years ago in developing countries!

Even in this changing world, individuals choose to embark on international careers. Sometimes, global careerists are seeking cross-cultural experiences and international adventures. Sometimes, the international move is just a natural extension of working for a multinational corporation (i.e., instead of a transfer from Winnipeg to Toronto, in a global marketplace the transfer could be to the Hong Kong office). Sometimes the move results from a strategic career decision to fill in a skill gap to prepare for future opportunities. Regardless of the reasons that individuals choose to work abroad, career practitioners and counsellors need to be equipped to help them navigate the complex terrain of the international workplace.

I teach in a 2-year graduate program in the McRae Institute at Capilano College in British Columbia that prepares Canadians for management careers in Asia. Each cohort includes several Asian managers and professionals who want to strengthen their international experience by studying in Canada. The program, which is now in its 16th year, has a strong and supportive alumni network.

As the Career Management instructor for the program, I am interested in the challenges that individuals encounter as they embark on international careers. Besides working with current students in the program, I also have the opportunity to work with alumni (and, in some cases, their spouses) when they return to Canada after working abroad. While some only stay in Asia for the year required to complete the cooperative component of their programs, others return home after 10 or more years in Asia. Still others choose to remain in Asia. As active members of our alumni association, many of them connect with current students to provide mentoring and career support. I've had the privilege of travelling to Asia several times in the past few years and, each time, I've had the opportunity to meet with several alumni to talk about their career successes and challenges.

This paper summarizes the insights and career concerns that have emerged from my personal conversations with associates embarking on an international career, their summaries of conversations with mentors and alumni, and my own work with alumni still living abroad as well as those repatriating to Canada or their home countries in Asia.

Challenges

It is interesting to note that the challenges most often reported by managers engaged in international careers mirror those experienced by managers and professionals who are working in North America. According to the interviews and conversations that provided the foundation for this paper, the biggest challenge faced in global careers today is life/work imbalance, followed by underemployment, limited language skills, maintaining personal relationships, staying healthy and fit, dealing with hierarchy and power, negotiating adequate salary and compensation packages, personal security, and maintaining professional networks. Only repatriation (the challenge of returning home after working abroad) seems to be unique to international careers. Interestingly, in terms of importance, this came in tenth place on the list of challenges.

In the following sections, each of these challenges is examined. Because many of the challenges are not exclusive to international managers, the results of this study should help us as career practitioners to more fully understand the work/life challenges of many of our clients in today's global economy—whether those clients are working abroad, professional immigrants working in Canada, or individuals simply impacted by a changing global workplace without ever leaving home.

Life/Work Imbalance

It is not only in international careers that achieving life/work balance is a challenge (Moses, 1999; Neault, 2002). However, it is interesting that this issue surfaced as the one mentioned more than any other by the international managers that were interviewed for this study. Some of them commented on the challenge of satisfying employer expectations for long work hours and extended work weeks—very similar to the concerns of managers and professionals in Canada who are constantly challenged to do more with less. However, others mentioned challenges more specific to working internationally: balancing leisure time between ex-pats and locals and finding time to explore the area in which they live and work. Both of the latter issues are exacerbated by limited leisure time, limited disposable income, and personal goals and values that are in conflict with lifestyle expectations in the ex-pat community.

Several international managers, for example, commented that ex-pat leisure activities commonly involve significant drinking. For individuals who are working long hours, not earning large ex-pat salaries, interested in learning more about the local culture, and committed to healthy lifestyles, spending a night in a bar holds little appeal. However, the combined impact of loneliness, lack of local language skills, and the need to maintain a professional network often wins out. As a result, many international managers find it hard to balance the time required for work and professional socializing with the time that they'd like to spend alone, with family and friends, or learning about the local culture.

Underemployment

We've known for many years that professional immigrants in Canada often granted entry to our country because they bring professional and technical skills that are desperately needed in our labour market, are unable to secure suitable employment (Brouwer, 1999). Many of these immigrants, if working at all, are working at entry level jobs

that do not utilize their higher-level skills. It's interesting that the same issue surfaced for Canadian managers working abroad—many are significantly underemployed, at least during the first few years of their international experience. Some of the reasons seem to be the same: the challenge of starting a career from scratch in a new country without a professional network in place; language barriers; and a highly competitive, well-educated local workforce competing for management and professional jobs.

Language Skills

Working knowledge of the English language was, in times past, a rare and highly valued commodity in international postings. Today, however, lack of local language skills has become a serious challenge for managers working abroad. Just as in Canada we expect fluent English or French, complete with relevant technical and business vocabulary, multinational organizations and local employers abroad are beginning to expect their international managers to be functionally literate in all of the languages of business—both local and foreign. This requirement is fuelling the trend toward local hires—if local managers, perhaps educated abroad or in a Western school within the region, are able to speak English and also the local language, they have a significant advantage in working on project teams and supervising local employees.

Managers that don't have a working knowledge of the local language also describe the frustrations of working with translators. A Canadian manager working on a joint-venture project in Shanghai, China offered this example: "Being able to speak a bit of the language just means that I realize that the translator intersperses her translation with comments to the boss like 'you want them to know that?'"

Personal Relationships

Many international managers shared stories of their difficulties in establishing and maintaining personal relationships while working abroad. Some find that relationships with locals are tainted with underlying expectations of money or marriage for political, rather than emotional, reasons. Others find that they are lonely and never quite "fit in" when working abroad. A Vietnamese manager, posted in eastern Canada, shared the following concerns: "I wonder if I belong somewhere or nowhere? On one hand I would like to go studying and working abroad, exploring new things. On the other hand, I'd like a sense of belonging."

Even strong pre-existing relationships can be strained by an international career. In many cases, only one person in the family qualifies for a working Visa—severely limiting the other partner's career options. Sometimes, couples choose to live apart, especially when temporary career moves take one of them to a new location. However, most find that it is difficult to sustain a meaningful relationship when living across the world from each other.

Health and Fitness

Another challenge mentioned often by these international managers was the difficulty of maintaining a fitness regime and spending time outdoors in many of the highly-polluted world-class cities, especially those with extreme temperatures. They also spoke of the challenges of surviving on unfamiliar foods and the expense, in many parts of the world, of fresh fruits and vegetables. As mentioned above, in the work/life balance section, excessive drinking also posed a problem for some.

Hierarchy and Power

Several of the managers we interviewed found it challenging to fit within a clearly established hierarchy at work, especially in Asia. They reported that local workers were confused about where to place them, especially if the work that the ex-pat was doing wasn't technically a management role but was paid at a higher rate than a local would earn. Another challenge for international managers, especially when they did play a supervisory role, was to deal with different expectations of productivity. Many also found the tendency for locals to hoard information very frustrating, especially from a Western perspective of knowledge-management and shared learning.

Salary and Compensation

An emerging concern for international managers is the reduction in ex-pat compensation packages. These days, in line with the trend toward local hires, it is less common for international managers to command the extravagant packages of the past. However, in most cases, they are still compensated at a significantly higher rate than a local manager. Not surprisingly, locals can resent this differential treatment—impacting working relationships within the office. On the other hand, international managers often find themselves without some of the safety nets that were part of their careers at home. Most will not be eligible for Employment Insurance, parental leave, sick pay, or pensions.

Shifting currency values and restrictions on removing assets from some countries also impacts those in international careers. One of the challenges mentioned by several managers was how to arrange compensation in a way that minimized taxes and risk of currency devaluation, yet maximized flexibility re where to invest. Many Canadian managers working abroad reported that they'd made a conscious choice to declare and maintain their non-resident status to avoid the need to pay income tax in Canada. Many have also negotiated complex compensation packages that include a portion of their salaries being paid in local currencies with the balance paid in US dollars and deposited in an off-shore bank.

Personal Security

Personal security has recently emerged as a career challenge—not surprisingly given the unstable international political events of the past few years. International managers are impacted by travel advisories, more difficulties securing work and travel Visas, and, on a more personal level, family concerns for their personal safety. After the terrorist attacks on September 11, some young managers were strongly encouraged by parents to return home to Canada. Some businesses chose to limit international travel and, instead, relied more on teleconferencing. The Bali bombings in 2002 have impacted foreign investment in Indonesia, resulting in less work for small consulting companies, and potential layoffs for international managers. The War in Iraq in 2003 and the ongoing War Against Terror continue to fuel the concerns for personal security in international postings.

Professional Networks

Many international managers expressed difficulties in staying connected personally and professionally with colleagues and friends at home while living abroad. Added to this was the challenge of establishing and maintaining new relationships and making time to attend social and professional events in their new communities. Related to this, many managers commented on the transient nature of ex-pat careers. They struggled with the constant good-byes as new friends and colleagues moved on to other international postings or repatriated to re-establish their careers at home.

Repatriation

Repatriation, or returning home after working abroad, not surprisingly brings with it even more career challenges for international managers (MacDonald and Arthur, 2003). It's interesting to note that many of the issues raised by Canadians repatriating are almost identical to the experiences of professional immigrants in Canada: lack of recognition for international work experience, lack of recent Canadian credentials or education, and the need to rebuild a professional network. Canadians also mentioned challenges in life outside of work: adjusting to the weather, food, and lifestyle; doing domestic chores (if they'd been living in a country where domestic help was the norm for foreign managers); driving again (especially if repatriating from a country where they'd relied on public transportation or had employed a driver); and learning to manage their money where living expenses and income tax are, in most cases, significantly higher. Repatriating managers summed up their challenges in the following ways:

- My biggest challenge is my resume. Some potential employers think I have no stability and others just want to chat about my travels.
- Professionally, I came a long way and have acquired a very distinct set of skills that are hard to describe. I'm tired of people referring to my work abroad as "travel."
- I find it difficult to approach the North American job market, which seems terribly impersonal, automated, and unfriendly beside Thailand's.

- I do feel that I have somewhat regressed in life. Due to my low salary abroad, I do not have a lot of money saved. I have had to move back in with my parents, borrow money from them, and I don't have a car—all of the independence I had when I left is gone.

Career Success Factors

Although the focus of this paper has been on the challenges of working within the global economy, both at home and abroad, it is important to recognize that there were also many success stories. From our interviews several clear themes emerged about factors contributing to career success: global contacts and relationships, patience and persistence, work/life balance, language skills, flexibility and open-mindedness, cultural sensitivity, humility, watching and listening, goal-setting and action-planning, and comfort with ambiguity. There are some obvious overlaps between the success factors and challenges—focussing on enhancing these success factors, then, should diminish the challenges experienced by individuals who chose to make the global workplace their home.

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Managing Global Careers: Changes and Challenges for the 21st Century
CG032712

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Life Strategies Ltd.

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